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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JAKARTA 000024

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT'S PARTY TAKES EARLY LEAD IN POLLS FOR
APRIL'S LEGISLATIVE ELECTION

REF: JAKARTA 2157 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: Pol/C Joseph L. Novak, reasons 1.4(b+d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: President Yudhoyono's Partai Demokrat (PD) is leading in early polls for Indonesia's April national legislative election. PD has become the most popular party only recently, taking a lead on more established parties. PD's rise mirrors that of President Yudhoyono who--facing re-election in July--is also doing well in the polls thanks to his clean image and steady response to the global economic crisis. That said, PD's lead is a bit of a surprise and quite possibly won't hold up. END SUMMARY.

PRESIDENT'S PARTY OUT IN FRONT (FOR NOW)

¶2. (U) President Yudhoyono is netting positive political news. His PD party is currently leading in the early polls for the April 9 legislative elections. Two surveys released by respected polling organizations this month assessed PD's popularity at 23 and 26 percent respectively, a significant lead over its competitors. Former president Megawati Sukarnoputri's opposition Indonesian Party of Democratic Struggle (PDI-P) party followed at 17% in both polls (PDI-P is the second largest party in Parliament). Golkar--Indonesia's largest party with 23 percent of the seats in Parliament--was third with 13 or 14 percent of the respondents. Indonesia's various Muslim-oriented parties are all lagging behind.

¶3. (U) The latest polls represent an increase in popularity for PD. Polls published in November by the same research institutes showed that PD was in the lead, but only barely, with a very slim margin over its competitors. Polling before that showed that Golkar and PDI-P were in the lead with other parties--including PD--behind.

RIDING THE PRESIDENT'S COATTAILS

14. (C) PD's image is closely tied to that of President Yudhoyono. It is a small party with more image than structure, mainly conceived as a vehicle for his 2004 election. The party only won 7.45% of the vote in 2004 (actually a good showing for a new party) and has a limited presence in Parliament (57 seats out of 550), a factor which has meant that the President has to rely on an unwieldy coalition approach to governing. As reviewed in reftels, the President's popularity has rebounded from a low after his government raised fuel prices in early 2008. The President has benefited by maintaining a clean image on the anti-corruption front, and his response to the global financial crisis has been steady.

15. (C) PD has been able to latch itself on to the President's rise in popularity. Tri Sukma "Nanu" Djandam, an adviser to the President on international relations, told Pol/C on January 7 that he did not think PD itself was doing anything differently -- "The main factor in the party's rise has been the President's leadership and people's appreciation of that. The party itself has not switched tactics or been running a brilliant campaign. It is all 'sink or swim' with the President."

IT'S STILL EARLY

16. (C) PD's lead is a bit of surprise and quite possibly won't hold up. The party is lucky to be tied to a relatively popular president, but--when push comes to shove--it takes a lot of effort to lure voters to the polls and PD is not known to have a strong organization. This has been shown, for example, in the fate of PD gubernatorial candidates, most of whom have lost (despite the link to Yudhoyono). Over all,

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the campaign season is just beginning, and it is too early to tell if PD can overcome Golkar and PDI-P, Indonesia's two political heavyweights. It is also noteworthy that Golkar and PDI-P are only beginning to rev up their campaigns.

17. (C) If PD does do well in April, however, it would help the President in an immediate, concrete sense by helping him get his name on the presidential ballot. The threshold of support needed to do that is steep, and depends on how one's party or coalition of parties does in the legislative election. Observers believe that the President will make the threshold, but a strong showing by PD can help ensure that.

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